

## what is sustainable agriculture?

Sustainable agriculture is a way of raising food that is healthy for consumers and animals, does not harm the environment, is humane for workers, respects animals, provides a fair wage to the farmer, and supports and enhances rural communities.



Characteristics of this type of agriculture include:

- [Conservation and preservation](#). What is taken out of the environment is put back in, so land and resources such as water, soil and air can be replenished and are available to future generations. The waste from sustainable farming stays within the farm's ecosystem and cannot cause buildup or pollution. In addition, sustainable agriculture seeks to minimize transportation costs and fossil fuel use, and is as locally-based as possible.
- [Biodiversity](#). Farms raise different types of plants and animals, which are rotated around the fields to enrich the soil and help prevent disease and pest outbreaks. Chemical pesticides are used minimally and only when necessary; many sustainable farms do not use any form of chemicals.
- [Animal welfare](#). Animals are treated humanely and with respect, and are well cared for. They are permitted to carry out their natural behaviors, such as grazing, rooting or pecking, and are fed a natural diet appropriate for their species.
- [Economically viable](#). Farmers are paid a fair wage and are not dependent on subsidies from the government. Sustainable farmers help strengthen rural communities.
- [Socially just](#). Workers are treated fairly and paid competitive wages and benefits. They work in a safe environment and are offered proper living conditions and food.

In 1990, the US government defined sustainable agriculture in Public Law 101-624, Title XVI, Subtitle A, Section 1683, as “an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long term, satisfy human food and fiber needs; enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends; make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls; sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole.”

The confusion with sustainable agriculture is that the definition is more a philosophy or way of life than a strict set of rules, and farmers can interpret the meaning differently. In addition, there is no legal obligation to follow any of the criteria for sustainability, so food can be labeled sustainable when in actuality it isn't. Many terms that describe this type of food, such as natural or cage free, do not have a legal or clear definition (though the USDA is currently working on this). For example, cage-free chickens might not be raised in cages, but they could be raised in overcrowded conditions in indoor barns, which is still inhumane. See our [Sustainable Dictionary](#) for an explanation of these confusing labels.

That said, we must stress that the vast majority of sustainable farms are run by family farmers who are hardworking, honest and sincere people. They work all hours of the day and night to bring you the freshest, tastiest, best quality food available. Read on to find out how you can reconnect with your food and eat more sustainably.

If at any point you become confused, please remember that changing to sustainable eating is a process and will take a little time. Sustainable Table has been created to help make this transition as easy as possible and to guide you through any confusion.

Sustainable agriculture is more a way of life than a law or regulation. Each step you take benefits both you and your family, and helps preserve and protect the planet for future generations.

<http://www.sustainabletable.org/home.php>